

A Southern Strategy:
The *Atlanta Constitution* and the Lincoln Centennial, February 1909

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In the days surrounding the centennial of his birth in February 1909, Abraham Lincoln emerged from beyond the grave to take center stage once more in the American public eye. Newspapers saturated their columns with Lincolnian headlines, detailing lavish celebrations and sublime speeches in Chicago, New York, and Lincoln's adopted hometown of Springfield, Illinois. The *Atlanta Constitution*, based in the former Confederate state of Georgia, was no exception, featuring over fifteen articles on Lincoln in the days before and after his February 12 birthday. The articles all shared a common theme: praise for the former president.

Southern laudation of Lincoln was nothing new: the mainstream Southern press had moved from detesting the Union leader as a crude tyrant during the Civil War to admiring him as the quintessential American amid the spirit of reconciliation in the 1880s. Indeed, writers such as Thomas Dixon had celebrated Lincoln as a Southerner himself, at least with respect to racial issues. The *Constitution's* coverage of Lincoln, however, took Dixon's linkage of Lincoln to the white South to an unprecedented level, and did so with a novel purpose in mind. Whether addressing Southern commemoration ceremonies, the involvement of Southerners and Southern symbols in Northern events, the connection between Lincoln and the South, or the relation of the former president to racial matters, the *Constitution's* articles all attempted to co-opt the centennial, and Lincoln himself, to justify the righteousness of distinctly Southern practices and values. As David Blight has noted, practitioners of the "Lost Cause," the pro-Confederate narrative of the causes and outcomes of the Civil War, used the rhetoric of reconciliation and racism to foster an American memory of the war "on Southern terms."¹ In a similarly assertive

¹ According to Blight, three narratives vied for primacy in the American memory of the Civil War: the reconciliationist narrative, emphasizing the valor of both sides; the white supremacist narrative, emphasizing white male solidarity against the dangers posed by African-Americans; and the emancipationist narrative, stressing the Civil War as a crusade for the liberation of an unjustly-enslaved people. The reconciliationist and white supremacist narratives together crowded out the emancipationist narrative by the late 19th century, and would continue to do so until the 1960s. See David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 1-5.

vein, the *Constitution* forged the figure of Lincoln and the occasion of his centennial into instruments for giving the rhetorical high ground to those threatened moral, cultural, and racial values—such as the importance of honor, the sanctity of Confederate symbols, and the righteousness of segregation—that clearly derived from the white South.

The *Constitution*'s portrayal of Lincoln denoted a new stage, or at least a singular case, in the evolution of white Southern thought respecting the fallen American president. Lincoln's transition from an object of Southern scorn to icon in the Southern pantheon of heroes is a well-covered historical subject.² The memory of Lincoln in the South began during the American Civil War itself. As historians Harold Holzer and Michael Davis have demonstrated, Confederate authors portrayed Lincoln in an overwhelmingly negative fashion—an unsurprising treatment, given that the election of Lincoln precipitated Southern secession in the first place.³

Southern views of Lincoln began to shift after the end of the war and Lincoln's assassination in

² Southern, or Southern-oriented, historians first explored the issue in the twentieth century. Archibald Rutledge's "A Southerner Views Lincoln" (*Scribner's Magazine* 83 [Jan.-Jun. 1928]:204-213), Richard Harwell's "'I Have No Prejudice Against the Southern People': Lincoln and the South" (in *Lincoln for the Ages*, Ralph Newman ed. [Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960], 203-207), Avery Craven's "Southern Attitudes Towards Abraham Lincoln" (in *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions for the Year 1942* [Springfield, IL: The Illinois State Historical Society, 1944], 1-18), J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton's "Lincoln and the South" (*The Sewanee Review* 17, no. 2 [Apr., 1909]: 129-138), and James G. Randall's *Lincoln and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946) all discuss how white Southerners came to respect and even admire Lincoln by the early twentieth century. Studies have continued in recent scholarship. Merrill Peterson, in *Lincoln in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) discusses how people in the North and South celebrated Lincoln as a white supremacist or a common man of the people at the time of the 1909 centennial. Michael Davis, in *The Image of Lincoln in the South* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1971), describes the Southern use of Lincoln in the early twentieth century as a way of reintegrating themselves into the nation as patriotic citizens. Richard N. Current, in *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1983), explores the tension between the visions of Lincoln as Great Emancipator and white supremacist. See also Harold Holzer, "Confederate Caricature of Abraham Lincoln" (*Illinois Historical Journal* 80, no. 1 [Spring, 1987]: 23-36), and Scott A. Sandage, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963" (*The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 [Jun., 1993]:135-167).

³ See Holzer, "Confederate Caricature": 23-33 and Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 62-72. Some Southerners lampooned him as the "Illinois Ape," the hapless and uncouth mid-westerner who, as ardent Confederate John McCabe, Jr. wrote in his 1863 novel *The Aide-de-Camp: A Romance of the War*, was "a weak tool in the hands of the wicked rulers of his [Republican] party." John McCabe, Jr., *The Aide-de-Camp: A Romance of the War* (Richmond, 1863), quoted in Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 70. Others, like the author of a November 1862 cartoon in *Southern Illustrated News* in which Lincoln removes his face to reveal the visage of Satan underneath, attributed the blame of war to Lincoln rather than to his Republican overlords. "Masks and Faces," *Southern Illustrated News* (November 1862), depicted in Holzer, "Confederate Caricature": 31.

1865. With the onset of Radical Reconstruction and, as their narrative went, its oppressive treatment of white ex-Confederate Southerners, many residents of Dixie came to believe—or at least to publicly claim—that the kind-hearted Lincoln, if alive, would have checked the bloodlust of Republican congressmen and provided the South with a more lenient reconstruction.⁴ As Davis and Richard N. Current illustrated, the former leaders of the Confederacy, such as Jefferson Davis, combined antipathy for Lincoln’s role in the war with regret at the consequences that his assassination entailed.⁵ To these ex-Confederates, Lincoln was still the enemy, but was the lesser evil when compared to men such as Thaddeus Stevens.

The predominant white Southern view of Lincoln further changed in the 1880s with the rise of the “New South” and its associated ideals. Increasing ties between the capitalist markets of the North and what C. Vann Woodward referred to as the “colonial economy” of the South fostered a spirit of sectional reunion.⁶ Men like Henry Grady, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* in the 1880s and the voice of the New South, urged both sections to put aside wartime animosities in favor of national progress through intersectional cooperation. For Grady and other proponents of the New South, Lincoln became a rallying point around which

⁴ Indeed, Lincoln’s “Ten Percent Plan” of December 1863, in which a former Confederate state could rejoin the Union after ten percent of its voters swore allegiance to the United States, was lenient compared to the plans of the Radical Republicans. Moreover, Lincoln pocket-vetoed the radical Wade-Davis Bill in 1864. Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln*, 88-90.

⁵ Current, *Speaking of Lincoln*, 147-148 and Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 111-112. For example, Jefferson Davis, writing in his 1883 *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, declared, “For an enemy so relentless in the war for our subjugation, we could not be expected to mourn; yet, in view of its political consequences, it could not be regarded otherwise than as a great misfortune to the South.” Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1881), 683.

⁶ The rise of the New South starting in the mid-1870s, as investors began pouring money into Southern sawmills and coal mines, railroads began connecting the Southern landscape, and Southern cities like Atlanta began to modernize and grow at astonishing rates. Urban growth in the South occurred at twice the national average from the 1880s and into the early 1900’s. Southern cities were also the first to receive modern infrastructural elements, such as electric rail-cars and electric lights. The “colonial economy” concept refers to the fact that Northern industrialists and railroad magnates poured capital into developing the South, both transforming the South into the producer of raw materials for Northern factories and relegating Southern elites to positions as middling executives for Northern-owned banks, railroads, and corporations. See C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 291-292 and Edward Ayers, *Southern Crossing: A History of the American South, 1877-1906* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 14, 38.

Northerners and Southerners could reunite. In his “New South” speech given in New York in December 1886, Grady put forth the idea that America was originally settled by Northern “Puritans” and Southern “Cavaliers.” He then asserted that Lincoln was “the sum of Puritan and Cavalier, for in his ardent nature were fused the virtues of both.” Lincoln was “the first American”—a purely national specimen who transcended sectional bounds, incorporating the mores of both North and South. Grady left these trans-sectional values ambiguous, but Puritans and Cavaliers alike could see such commonly-held tenets as a love of liberty, a strong work ethic, and a belief in white male superiority reflected in his speech.⁷ The former president was hence the appropriate symbol for a reunified nation. By including Lincoln in their pantheon of worship, Southerners could display their commitment to reunion and intersectional progress. Early twentieth-century Southern historians such as J.H. de Roulhac Hamilton reported and reflected the continuation of Grady’s patriotic view of Lincoln in the twentieth century.⁸

A key feature of the Grady model of Lincolnian values was its avoidance of racial issues. Grady was no opponent of institutionalized racism: in his “New South” speech, the editor told his New York audience that “it should be left to those among whom his [the African-American people’s] lot is cast” to handle race relations, meaning that Northerners should leave the South a free hand in maintaining racial subjugation. In succinctly warning Northerners to tolerate Southern racial policy, however, Grady recognized that racial hierarchy was a controversial subject, and a potential source of sectional friction. Thus, rather than provoke the North by linking the “first American” to Jim Crow, Grady shirked away from the topic, only mentioning

⁷ Grady discussed the common Northern and Southern blood shed in the American Revolution and the rise of assiduous industry in both sections, among other issues. His views on race are discussed further below. Henry Grady, “New South Speech,” 22 December 1886, <http://www.anselm.edu/academic/history/hdubrulle/CivWar/text/documents/doc54.htm>.

⁸ As Hamilton notes, “...everything has tended to implant in the minds of this generation of Southerners, reverence for his [Lincoln’s] memory as part of their heritage.” Hamilton, “Lincoln and the South”: 137.

African-Americans in the same breath as the former president in noting that Lincoln had freed the slaves.⁹ Grady cast Lincoln as a national hero possessing ambiguous trans-sectional values, but he did not include Southern-style racial views among them.

As historians have noted, other strains of Southern attitudes towards Lincoln developed in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, prominent Southerners began to put forth an explicitly white supremacist view of Lincoln into the mainstream in the years surrounding the Lincoln centennial.¹⁰ Virulent racists such as Senator James Vardaman and the authors Thomas Page and Thomas Dixon claimed kinship between their views and Lincoln's on the "Negro question."¹¹ Dixon went as far as to claim Lincoln as a Southerner. One of the protagonists of his 1905 novel *The Clansman*, Mrs. Cameron, told President Lincoln that she recognized him as a Southerner "by your looks, your manner of speech, your easy, kind ways..."¹² The most important facets of Lincoln's "Southern-ness" were his "ways" regarding race, evinced in his declaration later in the novel that "I can conceive of no greater calamity than the assimilation of the Negro...as our equal."¹³ Dixon hence showed that Lincoln was a Southerner, or at least a Southern sympathizer, when it came to the "Negro question."

Dixon thus incorporated the Southern method of racial hierarchy—segregation—into the Grady formulation of Lincoln. He thereby adopted a more assertive position than the former

⁹ Grady, "New South Speech."

¹⁰ See Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 168-170; Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln*, 33-34; and Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 145-152.

¹¹ See Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln*, 33-34 ; Frederick Curtiss, "A Southerner's View of Abraham Lincoln, February 12, 1909," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 69, Third Series (Oct., 1947- May, 1950): 308-330; Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905); and Dixon, *The Southerner: A Romance of the Real Lincoln* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1913). Vardaman, for example, constantly cited Lincoln's denunciation of racial equality during the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858, as well as Lincoln's support for colonization and gradual, compensated emancipation. Lincoln did indeed come out against racial equality at Charleston, Illinois in September 1858, and supported colonization and gradual emancipation even years into the war. However, Vardaman and other white supremacists tended to ignore the speeches and actions of Lincoln that contradicted their claims. Moreover, they ignored the evolution of Lincoln's views on race over the course of the war. Current, *Speaking of Lincoln*, 29-34 and Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 147.

¹² Dixon, *The Clansman*, 31.

¹³ Dixon, *The Clansman*, 46.

editor of the *Constitution*: rather than endowing Lincoln with a haze of vague characteristics, he stressed that the “first American” held decidedly Southern racial views. In doing so, Dixon affirmed that Jim Crow was an explicitly Lincolnian—meaning an American—value. Lincoln became a figure through which Dixon could transform the white Southern answer to the “Negro question” into the proper American formula. Couching Southern racial policies in Lincolnian rhetoric, Dixon could assert the propriety of his section’s racial equilibrium. He thus worked to gain white Southerners a strengthened racial rein—one based not on somewhat insecure threats, such as those of Grady, but on control of the high ground of American-ness.

Historians, however, have looked more towards Grady than towards Dixon in explaining how Southerners viewed and co-opted the memory of Lincoln during the 1909 centennial. Scholars like Merrill Peterson and Davis have noted the discrepancy in how different groups of Southerners viewed the Lincoln centennial. Compared to centennial-related activities in Northern cities like New York and Chicago, Southern celebrations were scarce.¹⁴ Some Southerners, such as Thomas Page, went north to deliver speeches on Lincoln.¹⁵ Others opted for celebrations in the South involving Confederate and Union veterans.¹⁶ As Davis asserted, the Southern festivities that did occur focused on the image of Lincoln as national hero or deity, in the same vein as Grady and Kentucky newspaperman Henry Watterson.¹⁷ Indeed, Southern newspapers like the *Baltimore Sun* fit Peterson and Davis’ model, declaring in editorials that

¹⁴ Whereas an estimated million people participated in centennial-related events in New York City, and 20,000 attended the Reverend Jenkins Lloyd Jones’ stereopticon lecture on Lincoln on February 13th in Chicago, nothing of such scale occurred in the South. Though a number of banquets and celebrations did occur, festivities were largely confined to major cities and towns. Memphis and Little Rock were the only cities to form centennial commissions, and Arkansas was the only state to declare the day a half-holiday. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 183-191 and Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 166-168.

¹⁵ Curtiss’ “A Southerner’s View of Abraham Lincoln” reproduced Page’s February 12th speech at a centennial gathering in Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ This occurred in Northern celebrations as well. Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 166-168.

¹⁷ Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 168. Watterson argued in an 1895 speech that Lincoln was “one of God’s own”—a divine instrument to purge the nation of slavery and sectionalism, so that the nation could move forward in unity. Watterson in Davis, *The Image of Lincoln*, 165.

Lincoln's "unfaltering and supreme patriotism, compel the admiration...of all Americans..."¹⁸

The *Sun* further channeled Grady by devoting entire sections of its February issues to letters from prominent Southerners praising the section-less and "American" character of Lincoln.¹⁹

Despite the continuity that the *Sun* evinced, however, changes had occurred in the South between 1886, the year of Grady's speech, and 1909. Numerous scholars have noted the resurgence of Southern pride and assertiveness that began in the 1880s and 1890s.²⁰ As Nina Silber and others have shown, Southern men reasserted themselves as masculine and martial contributors to the nation, especially after the Spanish-American War, in which the first American to die was a Southerner.²¹ Southern men—and the South itself—achieved new prominence in the national eye following the war, as both Southern and Northern authors praised the glories of Southern manhood.²² Though Silber emphasized the channeling of newfound Southern assertiveness into nationalistic sentiments, some Southerners used resurgent Dixie pride to assert the righteousness of Southern policies within the national union.²³ Lincoln,

¹⁸ "Abraham Lincoln," *The Sun*, 13 February 1909.

¹⁹ Jacksonville, Florida Mayor (and former Confederate soldier) William Sebring, for example, wrote that "every American citizen, whether he be a North man or a South man, should be proud of the character of so noble and so able a statesman as Mr. Lincoln." William H. Sebring, "Lincoln's Great Heart," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 February 1909. Another former Confederate, United States Senator from Kentucky James B. McCreary, declared that Lincoln was a "true patriot and a capable, honest man." James B. McCreary, "He Was a True Patriot," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 February 1909.

²⁰ For example, Blight has chronicled a shift among Lost Cause practitioners from mourning defeat to asserting the role of the South in the national heritage, while Blight and Ayers have detailed the multiplying of Confederate heritage groups and monuments in the late nineteenth century. The United Confederate Veterans formed in 1889 and the United Daughters of the Confederacy formed in 1895. The years 1885-1912 saw a flurry of Confederate monument-building, especially after the statue of Robert E. Lee went up in Richmond in 1890. David Blight, "'For Something Beyond the Battlefield': Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (Mar., 1989): 1156-1178, Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 267-299, and Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 262-263.

²¹ According to Silber, the South prior to the 1890s was largely seen in feminized terms, as the subordinate and unruly partner of the North. This changed amid the cult of patriotism and masculine ethos of the 1890s. Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 159-196 and Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 258.

²² Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 187.

²³ Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 196.

Grady's quintessential American, was the perfect instrument for such schemes.²⁴ By making the former president stand for Southern positions, Southerners like Dixon could advertise their values as Lincolnian—and hence properly American—mores.

In 1909, the *Atlanta Constitution* abandoned the moderate trail blazed by its former editor Grady—and carried into the centennial year by the *Sun* and other Southern newspapers—in favor of the assertive Dixonian tone that was beginning to enter the Southern psyche. Moreover, the *Constitution* went beyond the course set by *The Clansman*: besides asserting that Southern racial policy was a truly American practice, the newspaper also worked in its coverage of the Lincoln centennial, and of Lincoln himself, to envelope Southern values and cultural symbols in the protective shroud of American-ness. Taking advantage of an established ability to reach audiences across the country, the *Constitution* sought to safeguard endangered sectional practices and policies by broadcasting to the nation a Southern claim on the moral, cultural, and racial high ground in America.²⁵

For instance, the articles covering the centennial celebrations that occurred in Atlanta turned the Grady formula on its head, subtly using the rhetoric of reconciliation to establish the South's moral superiority within the reunited nation. "Atlanta's Significant Tribute to Lincoln," an article from February 14 commenting on the official celebrations that would take place that night at Trinity Church, seemingly deployed the rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism. The

²⁴ Minor, who railed against the deification and idolization of Lincoln that had occurred in the North, inadvertently illustrated how popular Lincoln had become. Minor, *The Real Lincoln*, 9-10.

²⁵ As proof of the widespread pull of the newspaper, prominent Northern publications commonly reprinted and cited its articles on everything from poetry to the proper state of race relations. Only a few examples are "His View of It [From the Atlanta Constitution]," *Washington Post*, 23 November 1901; "From the Atlanta Constitution," *New York Times*, 11 January 1906; and "From the Atlanta Constitution," *New York Times*, 2 October 1906; "Where You Loved Me Long Ago," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 November 1909; and "Fifty Years of Emancipation," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 September 1909. The scenario discussed in this paper was far from the first time in history that Southerners had attempted to rationalize, justify, and win support for their policies through appeals to American tradition. Drew Gilpin Faust, in *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), shows how the Confederacy linked itself to the American Founding as justification for secession and the existence of the Confederate nation.

Constitution began by praising the planned ceremony, which would involve speeches from members of both the United Confederate Veterans and the Grand Army of the Republic, and would thus “bring together in common cause to honor the memory of the great American, the veterans both of the blue and of the gray.” The memory of Lincoln could facilitate fraternal reconciliation, since the former president “belong[ed] to the whole United States,” and since “[h]is work was not sectional, but national...” Southern celebration of Lincoln was thus “evidence of a triumphantly restored nationalism.”²⁶ In words that could have come from 1886, the author stressed the ability of the Lincoln centennial to foster national unity.

While the author paid lip service to Grady, he ultimately revealed an ulterior agenda. In a reconciliationist vein, the author praised the “victory of fraternal spirit over the deep-rooted enmities of civil strife”—a moral triumph without which no celebration was possible. The “mutual tribute which confederate survivors, together with those who stood in opposing ranks” would pay to Lincoln evinced such a fraternal spirit. The laurels of moral victory, however, tipped to one side in the reunion. Northerners, in paying tribute to Lincoln, were honoring their “most abiding of friends.” Southerners, on the other hand, were honoring their “most generous of enemies”—a kindly former nemesis, to be sure, but their conqueror nonetheless. Thus, the “south’s [moral] victory [was] greatest,” since it “had not only to erase the enmities of war, but to crush and blot out the rankling bitterness of defeat.” Southerners had to overcome their loss in the war and their resentment of Lincoln. Their ability to celebrate Lincoln’s birthday was thus a tribute to their superior moral strength, grounded in their distinctively Southern culture of honor—a values system under much derision in the North as frivolous and archaic.²⁷ The anonymous author thus turned military defeat into a display of moral superiority over the North.

²⁶ “Atlanta’s Significant Tribute to Lincoln,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 February 1909.

²⁷ “Atlanta’s Significant Tribute to Lincoln,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 February 1909. For a discussion of Northern attacks on Southern systems of honor and chivalry, see Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 13-38.

By transforming Southern mores into the ethical souls of America, the author safeguarded and upheld the righteousness of the threatened Southern honor system.

While the *Constitution* protected Southern moral values through its coverage of the Atlanta ceremony, it emphasized the rightful prominence of Southerners and their sectional symbols in the identity of the reunited nation through its coverage of Northern commemoration events. For example, several articles used the occasion of the Lincoln centennial to thrust the song “Dixie” into national prominence. In “Singing of ‘Dixie’ No Act of Treason,” from February 7, the *Constitution* explored a controversy over the singing of “Dixie” in the North. The article began with the following question: “Did any authorized...person in Chicago forbid as an act of treason the singing of ‘Dixie’ in the public schools during the Lincoln celebration?” The author then related that a rumor confirming such a ban had circulated among Southerners. Though the author did not make his own explicit judgments, the use of the word “treason” in the question practically invited a sense of outrage among readers. For Southerners, who mixed Southern and national symbols at their own celebrations of Lincoln, there was nothing traitorous about the presence of a Southern cultural symbol at an intersectional event. The endangered status of prized icons thus required a strong response. A member of the New Orleans Progressive Union, whose letter to the Chicago Association of Commerce president was reprinted in the article, gave such a reply, declaring that the ban should be rescinded if “Chicago wishes to make any progress in the south.” The article thus implicitly asserted the rightful place of “Dixie” on the national stage. Chicago officials concurred, denying that a ban had existed.²⁸

While the article took advantage of the opportunity that the Lincoln centennial, as a national celebration, provided to push for the prominence of Southern symbols nationwide, it also co-opted Lincoln in the service of Southern cultural icons. Under the heading of “Lincoln

²⁸ “Singing of ‘Dixie’ No Act of Treason,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 February 1909.

Liked Dixie,” the article reprinted the words of Joseph Nimmo, Jr., a surviving friend of Lincoln who responded to the Chicago rumor by recalling Lincoln’s discussion of “Dixie” in 1865.

Nimmo noted how Lincoln traced the song from its Northern roots to its Southern co-optation during the war. Lincoln then wryly noted that, since “Dixie” was now captured Union property, a band before him could strike up the tune. Thus, as Nimmo conclude, the “good-natured humor of Abraham Lincoln” made “Dixie” a “truly national song.”²⁹

In one sense, Lincoln nationalized a song that was Northern in origin, taking it back from the grasp of the South. Indeed, the notion of captured property implied as much. In another sense, however, Lincoln legitimized a Southern symbol as an American icon. As time had shown, the wartime association of “Dixie” with the South was indelible.³⁰ Thus, the article credited Lincoln with the diffusion of a Southern icon into the national psyche. Whether Lincoln wanted to recapture “Dixie” from the South or to mask his affection for the now-Southern song in the language of the mock conqueror, the “first American” nonetheless enabled “Dixie,” with its Southern cultural stamp, to become a national symbol. The *Constitution* hence co-opted Lincoln to stress the legitimacy of “Dixie” and the Southern values it stood for as American values. By aiming to transform Southern icons and values into national symbols and mores, the *Constitution* thus worked to prevent the further endangerment of, and gain national respect for, its section’s symbols. With respect to “Dixie,” at least, this Southern strategy succeeded: the authors of an untitled article from February 8 smugly announced that they were “now listening to the National song of ‘Dixie’ at a Lincoln celebration.”³¹

²⁹ “Singing of ‘Dixie’ No Act of Treason,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 February 1909.

³⁰ For example, the band accompanying the congressional declaration of war on Spain in 1898 played both “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “Dixie,” symbolizing the reunited marital prowess of North and South. Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 178-179.

³¹ “Article No. 2-Untitled,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 February 1909.

The *Constitution* articles, besides emphasizing the right of Southern symbols to national cultural participation, also used the occasion of the Northern centennial events to assert the prominent role of the Southern people in the Union. Many articles focused on the experiences of the Southerners who went north to participate in the centennial celebrations in major Northern cities. For example, Judge Emory Speer of Georgia received multiple mentions regarding his trip to New York City to deliver a centennial oration on Lincoln's birthday at the Twelfth Regiment Armory. The Speer articles declared the right of the denizens of Dixie to advance clearly Southern views at such ceremonies by emphasizing the judge's Southern-ness. "Judge Speer Goes to New York," from February 10, notes that, "[as] a Southerner, he [Speer] will be heard with much interest."³² The article thus clearly implied that Speer traveled to New York as a bearer of his Southern sectional identity. An earlier article from February 7, "Judge Speer to Speak at Lincoln Centenary," likewise noted that Speer's speech on Lincoln would be fascinating due to Speer's "Southern loyalty and patriotism" and his ability to "represent in true form the Southern outlook."³³ Speer was a vessel through which Southern views could enter into a national celebration of the first American—and on Northern soil, no less.

Speer's own speech, excerpted in an article from February 13, explained the national implications of a Southern presence at the Lincoln centennial. He devoted much of his speech to a Jefferson Davis-like lamentation at the consequences of Lincoln's "taking off" for the South, leaving no doubt in the minds of his audience that he was speaking from a Southern point of view. The first part of his speech, then, emphasized the right of a Southerner to advocate his sectionalist views on a national stage. Speer then declared the resurgence of Southern patriotism, asserting that "the old American spirit is again flaming in our hearts." The South would forever

³² "Judge Speer Goes to New York," *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 February 1909.

³³ "Judge Speer to Speak at Lincoln Centenary," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 February 1909.

defend the American nation because “Southern men worthy of the name ever cherish a common, tender sympathy for the homogenous population” and for the “primitive virtues of the brave and kindly American stock.”³⁴ Speer thus cloaked his ultimate agenda in the language of reconciliations. At least some Northerners took the bait, embracing Speer’s speech as a paean to reunion. The *New-York Tribune*, for example, highlighted the reconciliationist aspect of the speech in a February 13 article, excerpting little of the address beyond Speer’s discussion of Lincoln’s benevolence and the Georgian’s affirmation of a Southern patriotic spirit.³⁵

Speer, however, had an endgame in mind other than mere reconciliation. As the *Constitution* article noted, Speer invoked Lincoln in discussing the “primitive virtues.” In one sense, Speer thus reflected Grady’s notion of Lincoln as the “first American,” binding the sections together through his quintessentially American values. Speer, however, invoked Lincoln by “referring to the fact that he was Southern born.”³⁶ Speer drew on a strong American belief in the connection between a person’s values and his heritage. For example, on the same day as Speer’s speech, then-President Roosevelt explicitly linked the former president’s values to his geographical origins, speaking about Lincoln’s character at his birthplace in Kentucky.³⁷ Hence, in invoking Lincoln’s Southern heritage, Speer implied that Lincoln also ran the gamut of Southern values. Lincoln’s affinity with the Southern mindset was not limited to racial views, as Dixon had emphasized, but extended to the entire corpus of Southern social and cultural mores. Speer could stress Southern views at a Lincoln centennial because Lincoln’s values were Southern values. Moreover, since Lincoln epitomized the national character, Southern values were the true American mores. Speer supported a reunion based on the traits of Lincoln because

³⁴ Judge Emory Speer, quoted in “Tribute Paid to Lincoln by Judge Emory Speer,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1909.

³⁵ “In School and Armory Lincoln’s Virtues and Deeds Extolled,” *New-York Tribune*, 13 February 1909.

³⁶ “Tribute Paid to Lincoln by Judge Emory Speer,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1909.

³⁷ See “Lincoln Paid High Tribute at Old Home,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1909.

such a reunion cast Southern values as the purest form of American ideals. Lincoln and his values became the means through which the South, even though it had lost the war, could lay claim to the mantle of embodying the American tradition.

Other pieces were even more explicit in marking Lincoln as a Southerner—and, hence, in making a case for the proper American-ness of the South. In the article “Virginia Claims Abraham Lincoln” from February 15, a reporter for the *Constitution* discussed Lincoln’s Southern roots. The correspondent noted that Lincoln “sprang from a very old Virginia family,” and accurately explained how his ancestors migrated from Virginia to Kentucky.³⁸ While technically correct, the author’s misleading emphasis on Lincoln’s direct connection to Virginia, and his omitting of the Lincoln family’s moves beyond Virginia and Kentucky, seemed to create the impression that the Lincolns had never left the South.³⁹ Indeed, the article included a picture of Abraham Lucius Lincoln, a member of the Virginia Lincolns, with a caption falsely describing him as the “Lineal Descendant of President Abraham Lincoln.”⁴⁰ At the end of the article, the correspondent mentioned the remarks of Reverend W.W. Staley, who, at the ceremony for Abraham Lucius’ graduation from Elon College in 1908, remarked that the student physically resembled the former president. Staley then urged him to “build a character” of equally strong resemblance.⁴¹ The article, in alternating between the Illinoisan Lincoln’s Virginian ancestors and his spitting-image Virginian “descendant,” all but portrayed Lincoln as a Virginian himself.

³⁸ “Virginia Claims Abraham Lincoln,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 February 1909. Lincoln did indeed descend from Virginian ancestors. Randall, *Lincoln and the South*, 7.

³⁹ By the early 1900’s, Kentucky—originally a part of the Old Northwest—was considered a Southern state. Thomas Lincoln and his family, including son Abraham, had left Kentucky and moved to Indiana and then Illinois, consciously rejecting a slaveholding society. Current, *Speaking of Lincoln*, 162-163.

⁴⁰ “Virginia Claims Abraham Lincoln,” *Atlanta Constitution*. The article itself demonstrated that Abraham and Abraham Lucius Lincoln were not lineally related. The ex-president’s grandfather and Abraham Lucius’ great-grandfather were brothers, but their lines diverged henceforth.

⁴¹ The Rev. W.W. Staley, quoted in “Virginia Claims Abraham Lincoln,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 February 1909.

Given the belief in the connection between heritage and values that Speer and Roosevelt illustrated, the author's implication was clear: Lincoln's Southern origins begot Southern values.

Moreover, the article depicted Lincoln as yearning to establish a formal connection to the South. The news around which the article focused was the discovery of letters from Lincoln to Abraham Lucius' grandfather from 1848. The letters were, in the words of the correspondent, "pathetic effort[s] to establish and prove his [Lincoln's] claims to Virginia ancestry."⁴² The *Constitution* reprinted the letters in a concurrent article as proof.⁴³ Lincoln, the Southerner by birth, recognized the affinity between his mores and those of the South and thus applied for admission into the ranks of the Southern people. Lincoln's correspondence earned the author's sympathy because of the earnestness with which Lincoln sought to establish a connection between himself and the Virginian nobility—a connection that would garner him recognition as the possessor of legitimately Southern values. The article thus tied Lincoln to the South through both his heritage and his willful intent. Lincoln's greatness, then, stemmed from his conscious efforts to embrace and emulate the ideals of his Southern ancestors. The South made Lincoln the man he was. As the literal and moral progenitor of the great American, the South thus deserved respect as the soul of the American civilization.

The *Constitution's* coverage of the Lincoln centennial reproduced Dixon's assertiveness to further the position of Southern moral values and cultural symbols in the national union. At the same time, the newspaper confronted and expanded upon the issue that preoccupied Dixon: the race question. At the heart of the issue in 1909 was the desire of white Atlanta elites for a stable racial hierarchy. Since the segregation of railroad cars in the 1880s, the separation of whites from African-Americans had become the norm across the South. The white-dominated

⁴² "Virginia Claims Abraham Lincoln," *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 February 1909.

⁴³ "Unpublished Correspondence as to Lincoln's Ancestry," *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 February 1909.

society imposed upon African-Americans constant reminders of their social inferiority. Beginning in the early 1900s, black resistance to the racial status quo gathered around the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois and his Georgia-based Niagara Movement, formed in 1905, which called for black equality in all spheres of life.⁴⁴ Fear of the side effects of the New South system, combined with rising racial tensions due to the Niagara Movement's agitations, precipitated a race riot in Atlanta in September 1906.⁴⁵ Following the multi-day riots, which left at least twenty blacks dead, African-Americans increasingly turned to radical agitation, leading to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909.⁴⁶

White elites, seeking to restore stability to race relations, looked to their black "ally," Booker T. Washington. Washington had gained national prominence following a 1895 speech that established his principle of the "Atlanta Compromise," in which blacks should publicly renounce claims on an arena already lost to them—politics—and focus instead on achieving economic progress. White elites had immediately latched on to Washington's proposals, seeing in them a way to maintain proper race relations in an orderly fashion.⁴⁷ Thus, such elites reached out to him after the riots to establish biracial methods of maintaining peace. Washington, fighting

⁴⁴ Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 100, 267. As an example of institutionalized racism, blacks needed to doff their hats when entering public spaces reserved for whites, while whites did not remove their hats for blacks, even when entering an African-American home. Blacks were also not allowed to walk, shake hands, or fraternize with whites in public. Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 89.

⁴⁵ The riot began in central Atlanta, the home of the unofficial organ of the Niagara movement, Jesse Max Barber's *Voice of the Negro*. In addition to racial tensions, the effects of rapid industrialization, commercialization, and urbanization, such as the proliferation of saloons and brothels in central Atlanta, led whites to seek a scapegoat on which to blame the moral ills of their society. African-Americans provided such a scapegoat, especially after white newspapers like the *Georgian* and the *News* inflamed the public over the summer through repeated reports of black assaults on white women. David Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riots and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 1,31-34, 39-41.

⁴⁶ Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 1-3.

⁴⁷ Washington's ideas were more complicated than white newspapers such as the *Constitution*, which called the Atlanta Compromise "the beginning of a moral revolution in America," made them out to be. For example, by 1900 he was spending thousands of dollars behind the scenes to fight segregation and even disfranchisement across the South. White newspapers tended to overlook or ignore such acts. Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 162-167, 267.

a rearguard action against Du Bois, reciprocated by tying himself more closely to the white establishment.⁴⁸

Biracial cooperation did not entail a more progressive attitude towards African-Americans. Indeed, as Scott Sandage noted, Atlanta passed disfranchisement and discrimination laws against African-Americans a month before the Lincoln centennial.⁴⁹ The *Constitution*, not known for progressive racial sentiments, displayed none in its coverage of the Lincoln centennial.⁵⁰ Two articles, “Protest by Negroes” from February 1 and “Three Great Countries Honor Abraham Lincoln at Springfield Banquet” from February 13 mentioned black criticism over their exclusion from the Lincoln centennial banquet in Springfield, Illinois.⁵¹ The February 1 article noted how a black organization condemned their exclusion from the banquet as an act “absolutely in violation of the very principle for which Abraham Lincoln fought hardest.”⁵² The February 13 article described and briefly quoted the protests of a black minister.⁵³ Neither article, however, offered a word of endorsement for the African-American position.

Racial justice was not on the *Constitution*’s agenda in the era of Dixon—or, for that matter, in the earlier era of Grady. Racial stability, however, was on the docket. The *Constitution* hence used the Lincoln centennial and—unlike Dixon—manipulated the words of Washington to firm up its vision of racial hierarchy.⁵⁴ At the same time, the paper worked to co-

⁴⁸ White leaders offered Washington and a selective few other Atlantan black elites the prospect of interracial law-and-order dialogue and organizations. Washington felt that such actions would prove his belief that interracial dialogue could best ameliorate racial tensions. A biracial civil league hence formed in November 1906. Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 126, 151.

⁴⁹ Sandage, “A Marble House Divided”: 237.

⁵⁰ For example, Clark Howell, the editor and owner of the *Constitution*, publicly opposed black education in his run for Georgia governor in 1906. He opposed disfranchisement laws such as literary tests only because they would qualify poor whites alongside their intended target of blacks. Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 49.

⁵¹ Jim Crow maintained a presence at the banquet, as well as at William Jennings Bryan’s speech and other events in Springfield. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 183.

⁵² “Protest by Negroes,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 February 1909.

⁵³ “Three Great Countries Honor Abraham Lincoln at Springfield Banquet,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1909.

⁵⁴ Dixon did profess his admiration for Washington on a number of occasions, but also found even Washington’s moderate vision of race relations to be too radical in some respects. The author asserted in an article on Washington

opt or neutralize the so-called “emancipationist narrative,” popular among blacks and some Northern whites, which called for the use of the memory of Lincoln—the “Great Emancipator” of the slaves—to fight racial injustice in the present day.⁵⁵ An article from February 13 excerpted a centennial speech that Washington gave the previous day in New York. Washington’s speech included a number of provocative elements. He lauded Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator,” spreading the principle that man everywhere must be physically free but also “must be enlightened.” Education and intellectual progress were the legacies that Lincoln bequeathed to blacks. Moreover, Lincoln emancipated the white race of the need to keep blacks in ignorance. In saying that “no man...need feel constrained to fear or hate of his brother” thanks to Lincoln, Washington criticized those men who continued to pursue discriminatory policies. Finally, he drew a parallel between Lincoln and blacks. Just as African-Americans had left bondage, Lincoln had “unfettered himself” of the burdens of prejudice to see the truth of racial harmony. Hence, through comparison Washington created a measure of equality between blacks and the former president.⁵⁶

The *Constitution* article reprinted none of these provocative passages in its article. As Godshalk noted, the paper had a tendency of selectively excerpting Washington’s words to extract its desired message.⁵⁷ Under the headline of “Example to Negro Race, Says Booker

in 1905 that the Tuskegee Institute founder’s emphasis on black industrial education was misplaced, since “no amount of education” could “bridge the chasm of centuries which separate him [the African-American man] from the white man in the evolution of human nature.” Dixon thus criticized Washington, rather than co-opting him as an ally in the Southern racial crusade. As evidenced below, the *Constitution* opted for another approach. See Samuel K. Roberts, “Kelly Miller and Thomas Dixon, Jr. on Blacks in American Civilization,” *Phylon* 41, no. 2 (2nd Quarter, 1980): 202-209.

⁵⁵ See Sandage, “A Marble House Divided”: 139, 148-149, Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 15-18, 300-379 and Blight, “For Something Beyond the Battlefield.”

⁵⁶ Booker T. Washington, “An Address on Abraham Lincoln,” 12 February 1909, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=937>.

⁵⁷ Godshalk provided numerous examples of the *Constitution*, as well as other papers, distorting Washington’s messages. In an August 30 speech, for example, he briefly criticized “black vagabonds before launching into a denunciation of lynching as the ultimate obstacle to Southern economic prosperity. The *Constitution* ignored the

Washington,” the author used Washington’s speech to promote the white Southern version of race relations. Omitting his discussion of enlightenment and his comparison between Lincoln and blacks, the article reprinted Washington’s exhortation for blacks to follow Lincoln’s example by being “simple, without bigotry and without ostentation.” Whereas Washington had paired such advice with a call for education, and with a leveling of the plane between Lincoln and blacks, the *Constitution* reduced him to reminding blacks to lead simple lives—to accept their places as inferiors unworthy of extensive education or grand dreams. The *Constitution* also kept Washington’s declaration that “Lincoln...was a Southern man by birth,” albeit one that recognized the immorality of keeping “another group of humanity...in ignorance.”⁵⁸ By stressing Washington’s depiction of Lincoln as a white Southerner, the article strengthened the claim of the white South on Lincoln—and hence on the national identity. Lincoln’s Southernness was a universal truth, to the point that even an African-American leader admitted it.

Moreover, Washington’s qualification of Lincoln’s Southern nature proved irrelevant, since white Southerners were not racial oppressors but emancipationists. The *Constitution* allowed Washington to call Lincoln “the great emancipator of my [the black] race,” but only because Washington immediately followed this statement with a tribute to the “white men of the south who...are today working ...to uplift the negro in the south and complete the emancipation that Lincoln began.” Though these Southerners “saw in Lincoln’s policy the ruin of all they believed in and hoped for,” they loyally accepted the results of the war and set about fulfilling Lincoln’s goals with regard to the African-American race.⁵⁹ Here was the Southern argument for moral superiority: since Southerners had to come farther than Northerners in learning to accept

latter criticism, opting instead for the title “Law-Breaking Negroes Worst Menace to Race.” Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 83.

⁵⁸ “Example to Negro Race, Says Booker Washington,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1909.

⁵⁹ “Example to Negro Race, Says Booker Washington,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1909.

the postwar world, they deserved recognition as the moral force of the nation. Here was the Southern claim to cultural predominance: Southerners, as the practitioners of Lincoln's policies, were also heirs to his title of "first American." And here was the subversion of the emancipationist narrative to serve the white Southern view on race relations: since Southern whites were the heirs of Lincoln, they could cloak racism under the emancipationist guise as morally upright policies meant to protect their wards. Jim Crow was the righteous and properly American formula, and thus deserved the adulation of the North. The article thus emulated and expanded upon the work of Dixon, rationalizing and championing the Southern racial solution by co-opting both Lincoln and the leaders and narratives of the African-American community.⁶⁰

The *Constitution's* coverage of the Lincoln centennial thus offered an example of how Southerners moved beyond reintegrating the South into a section-less nation and towards asserting the unique righteousness of the South within the national union. The Atlanta newspaper's articles did indeed display a desire for a complete, fulfilled reunion. The Southern version of reconciliation, however, entailed casting sectional mores, symbols, and racial policies as the true representatives of the American tradition. Through the figure of Abraham Lincoln and the celebrations surrounding his centenary, the *Constitution* asserted that the South, as the nation's moral compass, its cultural source, and its wise sage on racial matters, was the truly American section—and, hence, that its values and practices deserved protection and respect. The publication thus deformed Lincoln's character and the beliefs for which he actually stood. Lincoln's memory became a weapon in a renewed—albeit bloodless—sectional war. An effective weapon it was, given the lasting import and power of the Civil War and its figures in

⁶⁰ While Blight discussed extensively the emancipationist narrative as a contrast to the white supremacist and reconciliationist narratives of Civil War memory, he did not mention the ways in which white Southerners directly engaged with and twisted the emancipationist narrative to further their modern-day sectional aims. For example, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 344.

American memory. Indeed, the inclusion of Southern symbols like “Dixie” at national centennial events demonstrated the ability of Southern advocates to use the memory of the Civil War to successfully further the position of the South in the present. That the Southern strategy worked made the twisting of the character, values, and actions of Lincoln all the more nefarious.

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